

# A FOREMOST AMERICAN LYRIST

## AN APPRECIATION

*By William Stanley Braithwaite*

IN a sonnet called "Poetry," Florence Earle Coates has a line in which she sings:

She has envisaged the veiled heart of things.

This "envisaging" the veiled heart of things is that transubstantiating power in the poet which enables him to evoke those images in which life symbolizes its manifold and myriad significations in the subtle woof that makes the warp of existence coherent and explicable. Life itself is a great mystery, and all the apparent realities in the visible world, however solid or imperative in form and color, are but the embodiment of what is eternally real in the secret and veiled spirit in man and nature. To manifest this eternal reality, to make an understandable language of exteriorities that will express and interpret the meaning and purpose of this vital, unsubstantial reality, is what makes poetry in its functional communication the most profound of the arts, and the poet the noblest benefactor of mankind.

Among contemporary American poets, Mrs. Coates holds a high position for serious and sustained work. In the four published volumes to her credit there is represented a varied and penetrative outlook on life in all its significant aspects which, expressed in the most compelling forms of lyric art, stamp her as the possessor of an extraordinary poetic gift. She has conceived the high function of poetry as an interpretation and criticism of life, adhering to the canons of her beloved master, Matthew Arnold, and has proven her worth, and the right to receive and exercise the spiritual influence inherited from that great and austere poet.

Her art becomes a criticism of life, but it loses nothing because of its seriousness, of those palpable and exquisite qualities by which poetry itself is a special embodiment and expression of beauty. Because the message underlying the emotion and thought of her verse is the utterance of a soul that sympathizes with, and broods over, the "veiled heart"



of humanity, does not make her less conscious of that supreme beauty of form and language which Truth demands as the garment in which to present its shining purposes and the convincing realization of its secrets. But with all its subtle artistic forms, Mrs. Coates's poetry renders a lucid interpretation of life. Her lyrical work is at once poignant in feeling, melodious in tone, and emphatic in the substantive meaning that lies embedded in the thought or emotion. The purely art lyric is never deliberately shaped by her with that classical detachment practised by the poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; nor yet the over-elaborate decoration of the romanticist modern poet, that gives freedom to ambiguous sentiment rather than to spiritual grace. The chastity of thought and emotion is so deep in her as to create a poetic imagery tinctured with subtle and unfading coloring from the mystery of life itself, and consequently her lyrics, both in music and substance, are as pure as crystal. Compelling lyric art must be personal, which does not imply that it must be emotionally subjective. In its significance, as the language of humanity rather than the voice of an individual, its authenticity widens into a sort of testament of the spirit, that all men, not of one particular class or creed, social condition or nationality, accept as the symbol of their aspirations and hopes. Mrs. Coates's lyrics fulfil this personate-universality, they are so distinctively a language, because the voice in which she speaks it is full of the feelings that lie dumb, or are imperfectly expressed, in the heart of the human race. No art could be more one's own than Mrs. Coates's. In this she is not different from many another of the world's accomplished poets. What I mean is, though she sees the world made up of individuals, each with their particular and isolated hopes and aspirations, joys and sorrows, desires and ambitions, these individuals make humanity as a whole, and it is the life of the whole, full of its mysteries, unaccountable promptings and progress, which she sings, bringing it into communion with destiny and fulfilment.

Once we recognize this completeness, this inclusive grasp of humanity, in Mrs. Coates's outlook upon life and the world, we come to realize the significance of that line already quoted, in which poetry is said to "envisage the veiled heart of things," and accept it as the particular function of her own work. Through the four books of her poetry, this steady purpose is seen. It never works in any isolated passion, in any emphasis where the emotion is the outcome of some detached motive of the individual. In all her poems the ideal is rendered articulate through some particular aspiration. Despite all the unhappiness and pain in the world, it is far better than it seems, because there is an ideal existence that man experiences in his nature, and this he strives to realize in his outer acts and relationships. His failure to realize these ideals fully, but which he perpetually acknowledges and sets as the standard of conduct, is what creates those intense aspirations of the soul, out of which are born those



moods and desires, with their pathos and joys, making humanity beautiful. Beneath the complex surface of life is a simple fact that justifies the optimism pervading the most compelling art. In Dante's lines,

*Quanto la cosa è più perfetta,  
Più senta il bene, e così la doglienza,*

is declared both the reward and the penalty the human soul must enjoy and pay in its steady progress through the world. And Mrs. Coates in one of her profoundest and most beautiful lyrics, "The Ideal," conveys this same thought, in which there is not the mere personal utterance of a passionate and aspiring soul, but the complex cry of the entire human race:

Something I may not win attracts me ever,—  
Something elusive, yet supremely fair,  
Thrills me with gladness, but contents me never,  
Fills me with sadness, yet forbids despair.

It blossoms just beyond the paths I follow,  
It shines beyond the farthest stars I see,  
It echoes faint from ocean caverns hollow,  
And from the land of dreams it beckons me.

It calls, and all my best, with joyful feeling,  
Essays to reach it as I make reply;  
I feel its sweetness o'er my spirit stealing,  
Yet know ere I attain it I must die!

In another beautiful lyric, one of the most perfect in all American poetry, the "Indian Pipe," a woodland herb, is made to symbolize an analogous perfection in man, and in pure rendering of the mystery in a natural object, lyric feeling has seldom shaped itself into finer or completer subtlety of expression. The second stanza, which suggests the inexplicable wonder behind the appearance, confirms by its questioning that influence which man also feels in those dim perceptions at the root of his being. The lines may be said to contain an essence rather than a thought or emotion, but it is the essence of a passion that has seized the spirit, and exalted the mood of the poet into communion with some rarefied intelligence:

Is this but an earth-springing fungus—  
This darling of Fate  
Which out of the mouldering darkness  
Such light can create?  
Or is it the spirit of Beauty,  
Here drawn by love's lure  
To give to the forest a something  
Unearthly and pure:  
To crystallize dewdrop and balsam  
And dryad-lisped words  
And starbeam and moonrise and rapture  
And song of wild birds?



If the essence of Mrs. Coates's poetry is its grasp of and aspiration towards the ideal in human nature; if also it recognizes with equal intensity that man can never fully realize the ideal of life completely,—what is the specific quality, then, that so luminously quickens one's spirit, and supports one's weakening faith, and the troublesome doubts that are pressed upon one by the forces of the world.

Mrs. Coates's poetry never fails to sustain the spirit under whatever influence of distress it goes for consolation and strength to the source of her outpouring music. It is because upon the clear and positive foundation of her ideals Mrs. Coates rears the spiritual edifices of man's eternal needs. In these needs are reiterated the larger human ideals. The needs themselves flourish chiefly in the beliefs and hopes and strivings for human contentment and peace, as they express and emphasize their promptings in her poetry, instead of in that fulfilment of deed and growth which brings about a partial realization of the ideal. The edifices of man's eternal needs are shaped in her poetry out of no dream-world, are made of no symbols that float on the surface of man's changing sea of experience. They are the verities of man's mental sanity, as well as the fundamental wholesomeness and grace of physical conduct. So everywhere in Mrs. Coates's poetry, Love, Justice, and Immortality are sung, not as texts with their teachings of morality, social compensations, and philosophies of good and evil, but as the embodiments of warm and vital human traits and characteristics that afford the substantive pictures of life, becoming expressive and interpretative through the medium of lyric art.

In the sestet to the sonnet called "Earth's Mystery" is a typical attitude towards Love, which is represented as the giver of joy:

But as I pondered, seeking, soul-oppressed,  
To read the riddle of a world like this—  
Where Nature still seems waiting to destroy,  
I saw immortal Love descend and kiss,  
With timid wonder, reverent and blest,  
The quivering eyelids and the lips of Joy!

Love, the very core of earth's mystery, is also the exaltation of man's soul. Mrs. Coates's lyrics never express it on that sentimental or sensuous side which reveals the sickliness and fleetingness of passion. There is a more enduring vitality, a commoner and more infectious charm to the love she sings, because it is the voice of an emotion that strikes its roots deeper in life than physical experience. The love of the sexes may be a sort of supreme mode of this human feeling, as rendered in that fine "Song" which has sung itself into the universal heart of man:



For me the jasmine buds unfold  
 And silver daisies star the lea,  
 The crocus hoards the sunset gold,  
 And the wild rose breathes for me.  
 I feel the sap through the bough returning,  
 I share the skylark's transport fine,  
 I know the fountain's wayward yearning,  
 I love, and the world is mine!

I love, and thoughts that sometime grieved,  
 Still well remembered, grieve not me;  
 From all that darkened and deceived  
 Upsoars my spirit free.  
 For the soft hours repeat one story,  
 Sings the sea one strain divine;  
 My clouds arise all flushed with glory,—  
 I love, and the world is mine!

but it can only be perfect in this flowering since it controls wider motives, being "creation's breath and vital flame!" This love manifests itself through life, but it is touched with divinity; it flows out of the individual and becomes a human virtue. Because it is that which

. . . draws its deeper breath  
 From altitudes that know not death—

it is both the mystery and the revelation of that paradoxical goodness and strength leavening our more worldly tendencies. No American poet has so clearly visioned this radiance of the spirit, with its glimmerings, still pure white, lighting the way that man takes among his fellows. No influence of that austerity in her art, which is like a suppressed sensibility of all that is sad and perplexing in human life, can lessen the sweetness or tinge the joy for which she sees everywhere so great a capacity, so desirable a need, in human nature.

It is by some consistent shaping of truth, on the anvil of life, out of the elements of experience and intuition, of imagination and spiritual sympathy, that the poet comes to impress its substantive quality upon the world. At the heart of all significant poetry is this purpose, working intensely through the natural feelings of the singer. The soul broods and meditates upon a few great and mysterious questions of human experience, and the art that is engaged in becomes in substance so many declarations, in form so many manifestations of these spiritual interests. They are set forth in the abstract ministrations of beauty; and conveyed in moods that take on the palpable and various deeds of man in his private and public history: and is like a golden thread, running through that pattern of form and color woven in the effort to represent the changing and elusive impressions of nature. By personalizing these



questions, the poet achieves conviction; compels truth by emotional sympathy rather than by asseverating a doctrine. It is this way that the art of poetry becomes an interpretation and criticism of life. The embodiment is a ceremony of beauty, the whole spirit of which is a serious and vital message of life's deepest problems. In all the verses that a poet sings is imaged some intuition or feeling or sympathy, which, composed in the process of one's understanding, represents a picture of the poet's passionate realization of the secrets at the root of experience. The quality in the poet that endures is that power to see the workings of common influences upon the heart of humanity, and then visioning them forth into lofty and noble embodiments. The perfection of art makes these embodiments real, gives them an imperishable vitality. And so Mrs. Coates sees Justice at the secret root of all human goodness, and Immortality as the highest and best aspiration for which the soul of man strives through the multifarious shadows of the world. Nature, which Mrs. Coates loves, and whose spirit she renders with exquisite and subtle presentation of imaginative moods, hints to her everywhere, and in all seasons, of these two great attributes; and in man no less, there is a similar reliance, upon these mysteries which he is perpetually struggling to realize, and which by some inexplicable influence is constantly dominating, often against the perplexity of his more practical and temporary desires, the promptings of his inner life. No heartier note is struck, no note more quickening in its appeal to the human heart, carrying with it every sum and compensation of all life imposes, than that promise of immortality to the soul, which is the highest message of Mrs. Coates's art. "Life," to her, "is like a beauteous flower," which closes to the world at even, but to "unfold, with dawn, on heaven." Everywhere is this affirmation, with an insistence that only the greatest poets pursue with variety and freshness of form and imagery. She recognizes, however, the uncertain signs that beset man's path, to lure his faith from the goal, when "Doubt steals the light from immortality," and is ever ready with reassurance to stay the faltering step, never prompted with more solemn conviction than in the final stanza to "Pilgrimage":

Pilgrim, no: I cannot tell.  
Strange my course, and stormy woes  
And darkness may obscure its close;  
Yet I feel that all is well,  
For my Pilot knows!

Again, in the very remarkable poem "Easter" there is full avowal of this belief in language pregnant with significance and beauty, whose meaning widens like a circle of ripples upon calm water, linking man and nature in a permanence of growth. The impression this poem



leaves upon one, with its fine spiritual eloquence, its etching of nature's hues and forms, is like some vision come to one in sleep with so strong a familiarity that it does not vanish in daylight, but performs its alchemy upon one's experience with the world. How subtly in this poem is the saddened thought of the beloved dead, transfigured into the gladness of promise, with the recurring, eternal return of the abundant season. Elegiac in tone, in poignant substance it becomes a brooding affirmation of life:

I know the Summer fell asleep  
Long weary months ago;  
But ah! all is not lost, poor heart,  
That's laid beneath the snow;  
There wait, grown cold to care and strife,  
Things costliest, dying into life:

All changes, but Life ceases not  
With the suspended breath;  
There is no bourne to Being, and  
No permanence in Death;  
Time flows to an eternal sea,  
Space widens to Infinity!

In its process of artistic embodiment, poetry shapes itself into symbols that render by suggestion, with a lucidity unmatched, the complex emotions of the individual. Feeling is at the root of all consciousness, and the mind defines feeling, by the selection and grouping of images, in its endeavor to express experiences affecting the spirit, whose inward crises are registered upon the world through physical actions and events. In all vital and beautiful poetry, there is at core the continual functioning of a few of the many truths which in their infinite totality make up the standard of perfection for human life. Through the peculiar temperament of the individual poet, these few truths, by the mystery of some prenatal endowment, are woven into the nature as a divine obligation to be promulgated in the world. His art is the beautiful messenger, but these truths are the messages to which the poet is consecrated by the gift of his art; and through it, manifested and made articulate, in whatever substantive feeling that awakes his dream or inspiration,—full-orbed and glimmering,—are these real but unmaterialized objects given utterance. Always, in my endeavor to disengage the vital substance in poetry, I have tried to show what was the quality of that substance, what particular significance it took, in the thoughtful and lovely lyrical work of Mrs. Coates. To interpret her spirit, with all its delicate and subtle sympathies, touching with unobtrusive but familiar interests all human chords, sounding always a clear but subdued music, has been my purpose, rather than to emphasize the various



forms with all their felicities of diction for which she has earned as well so wide and enviable a reputation.

In summing up Mrs. Coates's achievement as a poet, one may refer to these rare and admirable qualities. The variety of her lyric forms are astonishing; and in them are moulded substances that in no case deflect from the precise intention which instinct and taste have guided. Her lyrics, always spontaneous in communicative suggestion, possess nevertheless a deliberate ecstasy which hints an indwelling pondering of mood, bearing its full ripe fruitage of thought and feeling. Her kinship in this is very close to Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold, and like them her soul is receptive of objective influences that have a wide application in their personal shaping. She draws from the Olympian world figures that typify some motive or desire in human conduct, and in the modern world the praise of men and women, heroic in attainment or sacrifice; or laments events that effect social and ethical progress, showing how beneficently she has brought her art, without modifying in the least its abstract function as a creator of beauty and pleasure, into the service of profound and vital problems.

No American poet of to-day has mirrored life so faithfully. Adhering to the best traditions of English poetry, Mrs. Coates is one of a small group of contemporary singers who are intensely American in spirit. The note of this group may be an ethical note, against which the unstaple exuberance and passion of some younger poets rebel, but it is the very essence of our national life and institutions, and must be reflected in our truest art. This ethical quality was the virtue above all others that Ruskin, none too liberal in his recognition of America's artistic efforts, praised in Longfellow and Lowell, setting its value above the beautiful but unmoral art of Keats and Shelley. The social conscience of Whitman is only a more emphatic rousing of the ethical spirit to action. The cardinal virtues of democracy are Love and Justice; Whitman insisted on their being recognized in social and political relationships, as well as in private and domestic intercourse. The distinction of this sound human quality does not prevent an increasing elaboration of the art that preserves it, as Mrs. Coates's poetry exemplifies. Its contagious appeal reaches beyond the limitations set by the reiteration of a single note, which generally attempts to enforce a philosophic or psychologic attitude. By assertion and affirmation, not of a mood or a dream or a passion, but of life itself as a whole, equalizing all these substances in one optimistic glow of aspiration, does one succeed in "envisaging the veiled heart of things," and come to interpret and express what the vision reveals of those secrets which lie shimmering on the surface of mortal experience.

And this is what the poetry of Florence Earle Coates accomplishes.



In both substance and form it has added richly to the body of American art. Its sane and healthy outlook upon the world, rendered with a refined and subtle expression of language and form, maintains the clean and wholesome, and yet no less magical and passionate, standard which characterizes the superior achievement of English poetry. Certainly the promise which Matthew Arnold discovered in Mrs. Coates's earlier work, and was the first to voice—though since confirmed by the foremost critical contemporaries—has fulfilled itself in the wider, more general acceptance of the public, whose appreciation of her unusual gifts has by common election placed her in the front ranks of our native singers.